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ABSTRACT

During a visit to a local library archives, many old photographs were discovered which turned out to be useful teaching tools for an English class. Copies of a few of them were brought to class where students were asked to choose one and write about it. The responses were exceptional. Students were writing about their town; some of them were writing about their ancestors. Digging around for useful archives became a hobby. Students were brought along on these archival searches which included viewing old newspapers preserved on microfilm. A variety of activities were developed from the news stories and pictures that were found. Students began to discover themselves, their town, and the past. The variety of things available in city, university, or state archives is phenomenal. Although the news stories and pictures were used on an occasional basis, they could have been grouped together into a unit. Archival materials can be a positive and enjoyable alternative to published textbooks. (DC)

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Forces and Sources: Beyond the Bookroom Wall

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Level:

High school and college

Author's Comment:

Every English teacher knows that there are forces. There are pressures. Select from "back to the basics" or the "minimal competency movement" or "individualization of instruction for 35 students in a 55 minute period, contained classroom" yet remember Title I, VII, IX. Complying with all this at once, a teacher is headed for certain culture shock.

Forces mounted and finally avalanched into my classroom one day when I was struggling to use one of those new text books designed to reach inner-city youth. You know the ones, they have many pictures, few words, some rough and tumble teenagers who deal with drugs, depression, isolation . . .the concrete jungle. It wasn't working. The students had tuned out, bored. I was happy to leave that afternoon and made a sudden change in plans in order to boost my spirits. I went to a library. It's an odd therapy, perhaps, but inexpensive.

It was that afternoon while I was going through archives that the force became a source and I discovered the obvious. Teachers are supposed to consider the student's background and cultural diversity. Through some strange twist of mind, though, we are all taught to do it by using a published text and adapting it to particular needs and situations. But there are things out there waiting to be re-discovered; free things, wonderful things. They may be in your library, in archives, or even in a dusty drawer your great aunt hasn't gone through for years.

The Sources

That afternoon I found old photographs, lots of them. I had a few copied by the library attendant at the cost of ten cents a page. The next morning I made several copies from the originals, using an inexpensive screen to bring out the greys (many of the less expensive copiers in the schools print only blacks). What I was unknowingly beginning to develop was my own inner-city local, original, multi-cultural, *Stop, Look and Write.* I had a picture of the Boss Saloon, the first automobile in the city, prim students in white starched collars and frilly white aprons, stiff, respectable and bored. There was a turn of the century football team, all native Americans; there was a funny

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little girl, her black shoes worn white at the toes, wearing a ragged dress, smiling as though the world were hers alone.

The next class, students were allowed to select a picture they wanted and write about it using description or creativity. The responses were exceptional. They were writing about their town; some of them, their ancestors.

The Force

It became a hobby of mine, digging around for useful archives. I finally decided to see if any students wanted to join the hunt. Their enthusiasm exceeded the size of my car, but I took four to the library with me that afternoon. They laughed at me and I at them when we decided to get into the old Albuquerque newspapers, preserved on microfilm. The second time back the students referred to it as going to the silent movies and asked me to sneak some popcorn in so that it would really be like going to the movies. There are few things I fear like the wrath of a librarian, but this was a measure of my dedication.

The students found among other things, an ad for a liquid that one could drink for an internal ailment or put on an external one. A quick cure was certain whether patient was a person or a horse. There was also an article from the 1890's on the mental differences between the sexes, as well as the story of the first Edison bulb bringing light into the darkness of a Pennsylvania town. We copied these and began to develop exercises with them in small group activities. Some groups made cloze tests for other students to take; some chose to modernize the language of the stories. Some worked on titles, others preferred to allow themselves more imagination and discussed how electric lights had changed the century, how better off we would have been without them.

The students began to discover themselves, their town and the past, which was so unreal to them, became something they had seen and experienced in a "down home" way. The variety of things available in city, university or state archives is phenomenal. One "low-rider" (I believe they used to be called "hot rodders") spent several days working with a 1913 driver's manual. He set his own criterion for modernizing it, and did some very good work.

Although these news stories and pictures could be grouped into a unit, perhaps with a reading of *Our Town*, I liked using them occasionally. It always made that day somewhat special and the day following it was, then, easier.

The copyright law has been tightened and textbook monies are decreasing. Archival materials can be a positive and enjoyable force for you and your students if you will just break through that bookroom wall, examine available archives and then do it yourself in the charcteristic American way.